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SUBJECT: GOJ SPOKESPERSON TALKS ENTHUSIASTICALLY ABOUT
HUMAN RIGHTS AND PRESS FREEDOM, BUT HAS NO CONCRETE PLAN

Classified By: Amb. Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) An enthusiastic Asma Khader, the new government Spokesperson, outlined for the Ambassador her intent to use her position in the cabinet to shape GOJ policies to support greater press freedom, respect for human and women's rights, and development of NGOs. Khader, a lawyer and activist from the NGO community, also emphasized the need for NGOs and citizens to have access to information about government goals and performance. However, she presented no concrete plan to achieve her goals, and -- with no staff to support her -- will have few resources to encourage reform. END SUMMARY.

AN ACTIVIST TURNED CABINET MEMBER

2. (C) New GOJ spokesperson, Asma Khader, told the Ambassador and PolCouns November 12 that she was very proud to be a part of the new government, which she described as having "the highest percentage of women ever in the region, and in non-traditional positions as well." Coming out of the human and women's rights NGO community, she enthusiastically described her mission as trying to increase "freedom of access to the media and modern knowledge." She said she also hopes to increase citizen involvement in political life and government decision-making, and to demonstrate to women that they can play roles outside of the traditional tribal and family structure. She noted, however, that as part of a government, she would have certain "restraints" on her activism. She described her ministerial appointment as an opportunity to influence the government's program on women's and children's issues and human rights, noting that senior royal family members have always accepted these principles and provided support.

OPENING UP THE MEDIA -- SLOWLY

3. (C) Khader said she wants to strengthen the independence of the media and media-associated institutions like the Higher Council for Media. "I hope this government will encourage freedom of the press," she said. One way to do this, she suggested, is to challenge the local press by opening up to outside media. There are good Jordanian media people, but they have tended to be hired away by other regional media outlets -- such as Lebanon and Gulf-based satellite TV stations. It may be necessary, Khader suggested, to pay higher salaries and provide more opportunities for training and professional development to keep good media people in Jordan.

TRANSPARENCY OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

4. (C) Khader said that another of her chief goals would be to promote "transparency" in government programs by making information about government policies, goals, and statistics available easily to NGOs and average citizens. This transparency will permit Jordanians and interest groups to evaluate the performance of the government against objective standards, and suggest alternatives when necessary. The King, she said, hopes to set up "a place" -- an office, web site, or both -- where citizens can go and have their questions answered.

GOVERNMENT NEEDS NGO PRESSURE TO IMPROVE

5. (C) Asked about her experience as an NGO leader, she said that the Jordanian NGO community has for many years been "caught between the government and opposition, and we were beaten by both." The government, she said, routinely discouraged large NGO gatherings, arguing to NGO event organizers that they should invite "only 10, 20, or 30

people" to conferences and meetings. With these small numbers, she said, it was hard to sustain the drive needed in NGO work. The opposition (read Islamists) routinely attacked NGOs for their Western sources of funding and liberal causes such as women's and human rights. Moreover, NGOs in Jordan have done little to help themselves, she argued, criticizing the existing NGO community as poorly organized and meek. If NGOs start to bring well thought out ideas to the government, she promised, "I know the government will listen. Government needs pressure groups to improve," she declared. She said that she would push for a further liberalization of the NGO law. "If you let NGOs do their work, they will not go to extremes."

16. (C) She confirmed that the government has not yet designated a locus in the cabinet for women's and human rights policy, partially, she explained, because the government intends to integrate these issues into the programs of all ministries. (NOTE: Since the formation of this new government, several human and women's rights activists have mentioned to us their disappointment at the lack of a clearly defined, ministerial level point of contact for human rights and women's issues. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

17. (C) Khader was enthusiastic about the direction of the new government, her new portfolio, and her potential for influencing GOJ policies in a positive direction. At the same time, she seems to realize that the "traditional" way of doing business will be a real drag on her and the government's reform agenda. While full of good intent, Khader did not present a concrete plan for achieving her goals -- in fact, she seemed to be thinking out loud during much of the conversation. In addition, as a cabinet member without a ministry to support her, she will have little more than moral suasion to bring to bear in encouraging openness in the policies of other ministries.

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